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Revolving Doors and Leaky Buckets

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Recommended Citation

Ingersoll, R. (2007). Revolving Doors and Leaky Buckets. *Letters to the Next President: What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education, 2008 Election Edition*, 141-147. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/544

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Revolving Doors and Leaky Buckets

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Education

Letters

to the Next President

What We Can Do About the Real Crisis
in Public Education

2008 ELECTION EDITION

Edited by Carl Glickman

Foreword by Bill Cosby



Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

RICHARD INGERSOLL

REVOLVING DOORS AND LEAKY BUCKETS



Dear President :

Few educational problems have received more attention, and yet been more misunderstood, than the failure of our education system to ensure that elementary and secondary classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers. Again and again, commentators and policy analysts have told us that our elementary and secondary schools are being confronted with severe teacher shortages. At the root of these problems, we are told, is a dramatic increase in the demand for new teachers primarily resulting from two converging demographic trends—increasing student enrollments and increasing teacher retirements due to a “graying” teaching force. Shortfalls of teachers, the argument continues, are forcing many school systems to resort to lowering their teacher qualification standards to fill teaching openings, inevitably resulting in the hiring of more and more underqualified teachers and lower school performance.

The prevailing policy response to these school staffing problems has been to attempt to increase the supply of teachers. In recent

years, a wide range of initiatives have been implemented to recruit new candidates into teaching. Among these are career-change programs, such as the federally funded "Troops-to-Teachers" program, which aim to entice professionals to become teachers, and Peace Corps-like programs, such as the privately sponsored "Teach for America," a program that is designed to lure the best and brightest into understaffed schools. Some school districts have even taken to recruiting teaching candidates from other countries. Many states have instituted alternative teacher certification programs, whereby college graduates can postpone formal education training and begin teaching immediately. Financial incentives such as signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness, housing assistance, and tuition reimbursement have all been used to aid recruitment. The No Child Left Behind Act provides extensive federal funding for such initiatives.

The above efforts are highly worthwhile but, unfortunately, they will not solve the problem schools have staffing classrooms with qualified teachers. Indeed, a close look at the data shows these efforts are largely a case of a wrong diagnosis and a wrong prescription.

The best data to understand these issues come from the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Education. Begun in the late 1980s, this is the largest and most comprehensive data source available on teachers and the staffing of schools. Indeed, it was originally created because of a dearth of information on these very problems and issues.

What do these data tell us?

The data reveal that the conventional wisdom on teacher shortages is, in fact, partly correct. Consistent with shortage predictions, the data show that the demand for teachers has increased over the past two decades. Since the mid-1980s, student enrollments have increased, teacher retirements have also increased, most schools have had job openings for teachers, and the size of the elementary and secondary teaching workforce has increased. Most important, the data tell us that substantial numbers of schools have experienced difficulties finding qualified candidates to fill their teaching position openings.

After that, the data and conventional wisdom begin to diverge. The data also show that the demand for new teachers and subsequent staffing difficulties confronting schools are not primarily due to student enrollment and teacher retirement increases, as the conventional wisdom holds. Most of the demand for teachers and hiring is simply to replace teachers who recently departed from their teaching jobs, and most of this teacher turnover has little to do with a "graying" workforce.

Teaching is an occupation with relatively high annual turnover, especially compared to other kinds of professional work. Teaching is also a relatively large occupation. Teachers represent four percent of the entire civilian workforce. There are, for example, more than twice as many elementary and secondary teachers as there are registered nurses, and there are five times as many teachers as there are either lawyers or professors. The sheer size of the teaching force combined with its relatively high annual turnover means that there are large numbers of teachers in some kind of job transition each year. For example, the data establish that between the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 school years, well over one million teachers—almost one third of this large workforce—moved into, between, or out of schools. The image that these data suggest is one of a "revolving door."

Of course, not all teacher turnover is a bad thing. Some degree of employee turnover is normal and beneficial in any workplace. Too little turnover of employees is tied to stagnancy in organizations; effective organizations usually both promote and benefit from a limited degree of turnover by eliminating low-caliber performers and bringing in "new blood" to facilitate innovation. But a "revolving door" is costly. In the corporate sector, it has long been recognized that high employee turnover means substantial recruitment and training costs and is both the cause and effect of productivity problems.

In contrast to the corporate sector, however, there has been very little attention paid to the impact of employee turnover in education. One notable exception was a recent attempt to quantify the costs of teacher turnover in Texas. This study concluded that teacher turnover costs the state hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

Some of the costs and consequences of employee turnover are more easily measured than others. One type of cost that is less-easily quantified includes the negative consequences of high turnover for organizational performance in work sites, such as schools, requiring extensive interaction among participants. The good school, like the good family, is characterized by a sense of belongingness, continuity, and community, and is especially vulnerable to teacher losses.

The data explain that another cost of high teacher turnover is the teacher shortage. However, while the teaching occupation, as a whole, has relatively high turnover, the data also reveal that the revolving door varies greatly among different kinds of teachers and different kinds of schools. Teaching is an occupation that loses large numbers of its new members very early in their careers—long before the retirement years. The data inform that after just five years, between forty and fifty percent of all beginning teachers have left teaching altogether. A number of studies have also found that the “best and brightest” among new teachers—those with higher test scores on the SAT and the National Teacher Exam—are the most likely to leave. Moreover, the data also show that the revolving door also varies greatly among different kinds of schools. High-poverty public schools have far higher teacher turnover rates than do more affluent schools. Urban public schools have more turnover than do suburban and rural public schools.

These data raise two important questions: Why do teachers depart at relatively high rates, and why are these rates so dramatically different between schools?

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the data attest that retirement accounts for only a small part—one eighth—of the total departures. Far more significant are personal reasons for leaving, such as pregnancy, childrearing, health problems, and family moves. These are a normal part of life and common to all workplaces. There are also two other equally significant reasons for teacher turnover—job dissatisfaction and the desire to pursue a better job inside or outside of the education field. Together, these two reasons are the most prominent source of turnover and account for over half of all departures each year.

Of those who leave because of job dissatisfaction, most link their turnover to several key factors: low salaries, lack of support from the school administrators, lack of student motivation, student discipline problems, and lack of teacher influence over school decision making.

What can federal policy do? One obvious strategy is to increase teacher salaries, which are, not surprisingly, strongly linked to teacher turnover rates. Recent national data (2003–2004) tell us that the average starting salary for beginning teachers is under thirty thousand dollars. But salaries are not the only source of the problem. This is important to recognize because increasing teacher salaries across the board is, of course, very expensive, given the sheer size of the teaching occupation.

A second strategy is to increase the support provided to teachers, especially for beginners. This might range from providing adequate amounts of classroom supplies to providing mentoring for new teachers. The latter is crucial. Life for beginning teachers has traditionally been described as a “sink or swim” proposition, and, as the data show, this is an occupation where large numbers of beginners do indeed sink in the first few years on the job.

A third strategy is to increase teachers’ influence over school decision making and to address the all-important issue of how much input and autonomy teachers are allowed in their jobs. As I have shown in my book *Who Controls Teachers’ Work?: Power and Accountability in America’s Schools*, teachers have little say in many of the key decisions that directly affect their work, but they are, nevertheless, increasingly held accountable for the results. Notably, the data also indicate that there is significantly less teacher turnover in schools where teachers are allowed more influence over crucial decisions.

Traditionally, the management of schools has been under the jurisdiction of states and school districts and has been somewhat off-limits to federal policy. However, recent federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, has steadily increased accountability for schools and teachers. Accountability for teachers is, of course, necessary but it is useful to remember one of the classic adages in management—employees should not be held accountable for things they do

not control. If the new accountability measures only serve to increase pressure on teachers without providing commensurate increases in their autonomy and resources, then they may end up simply driving even more teachers out of the occupation.

Reduction of student discipline problems is a fourth factor tied to teacher turnover. Not surprisingly, many former teachers tell us this is one of the major reasons for their exits. Policymakers often bemoan the difficulty of confronting the seemingly intractable societal problem of disrespect for authority among youth. This may well be true, but the data tell us that schools vary dramatically in their degree of student misbehavior, regardless of the background and poverty levels of their student populations. Schools that do a better job coping with and curbing student misbehavior problems have significantly less teacher turnover. In this regard, one possible target of federal funds is alternative schools for problem students. These programs both help teachers by removing problem students from their classrooms, and help students by providing a second chance for those youngsters unable to fit into the regular public school program.

WHAT, THEN, CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THE DATA about the causes and solutions to the teacher shortage? The data confirm that focusing all of our efforts on recruiting new teachers will not solve the staffing problems plaguing schools. The root of the problem is not shortages in the sense of too few teachers being produced; rather the root of the problem is largely turnover—too many teachers departing prior to retirement. Hence, the solution is not recruitment, but retention. In plain terms, recruiting thousands of new candidates into teaching will not solve the teacher crisis if forty to fifty percent of these new recruits leave the occupation in a few years, as the data tell us they do. The image that comes to mind is that of a bucket rapidly losing water because there are holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not be the answer if the holes are not first patched.

Of course, nothing in the data suggests that plugging these holes will be easy. But, the data do make clear that schools are not simply victims of inexorable societal demographic trends, and there is a sig-

nificant role for the management and operation of these workplaces in both the genesis of, and the solution to, their staffing problems. Improving the workplace conditions in our schools, as discussed above, would contribute to lower rates of teacher turnover, which, in turn, would slow down the revolving door, help ensure that every classroom is staffed with qualified teachers, and ultimately increase the performance of schools. In short, the data give us a simple and clear message: If we want to ensure that every elementary and secondary classroom is staffed with a qualified teacher, we need to first improve the quality of the teaching job.

Sincerely,
Richard M. Ingersoll

Suggested Reading

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